

October 2, 2016

World Religions: Christianity

John 3:16-21

Opening words: Why are you a Christian? Can you answer that question without revealing to the world your prejudices? Your prejudices are not funny, because they expose your ignorance. Can you answer that question without giving your family history? One of the blessings in your life is that you were born into a Christian home. It is nice that your grandfather was a preacher, but Jesus must be your Lord and Savior. Can you answer that question without mentioning your relationships within the church? You can make friends anywhere. Can anyone here answer the question, why are you a Christian, with sound theological reasoning? This sermon series, *World Religions*, is designed to help you answer the question, why are you a Christian, using basic Christian theology. Each one of the other world religions has theological flaws. In the past two weeks, we have looked at Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism lacks grace. They both lack God.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are going to look at the largest religion in the world, Christianity. Our scripture reading is John 3:16-21. You know the story. One night, Nicodemus, the Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to ask Jesus a question. Much has been made over the fact that he came at night. Some believe, he came at night to hide his identity. Others believe, he came at night because the day's work was over and there was time to talk. He asked Jesus about his miracles, but Jesus talks about eternal life. The first verse in our reading is the key verse. Some say it is the summary of the entire Bible. You can quote the verse with me, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* As a Christian people, we believe in Jesus. The question is, do we really believe in Jesus? Are you born again? In other words, are we willing to change for Jesus? Are we willing to sacrifice for Jesus? Let us hear these sacred words.

John 3:16-21 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Let me begin with this question: What do these six people have in common?

Tom Hanks
MC Hammer
Tyler Perry
Kathie Lee Gifford
Chuck Norris
Russ Adams

This is the answer: Each one is a Christian. They are not the only Christians in the world.

According to the Pew Research, there are 2.4 billion Christians in the world. That means 32.4% of the world identifies Jesus as their Lord and Savior. That makes Christianity the world's largest religion. Our religion can be broken down into three groups: Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox. The Catholic Church is the largest of the three at 1.09 billion. Christianity is the predominant religion in Europe, Russia, the Americas, the Philippines, Eastern, Southern and Central Africa. The United States has the largest Christian population in the world, followed by Brazil and Mexico. According to Wikipedia (so you know it is true), there are 230 million Christian Americans. That means approximately 72% of Americans consider themselves a Christian. The closest worshipping body of Christians is at 4580 Canfield Road, the Western Reserve United Methodist Church.

So what do Christians believe? The simplest answer to that question is Jesus. In Christianity, it all begins and ends with Jesus. The only thing that really matters to us is Jesus. The Master is the beginning and the end, first and the last, the alpha and the omega. If you require a more detailed answer to that question, then look at the historical creeds of the church. Every week during the 11:00 service, we say the Apostle's Creed. I think it is important to say the Apostle's Creed every week because I want people to learn the Apostle's Creed. When we say the Apostle's Creed you are telling the world exactly what you believe. This is the creed. This is what you say you believe:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth;
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under
Pontius Pilate, who was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into Hell*;
the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the
forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.
Amen. (* Note – many churches, including ours, omit this line.)

I hope you don't just say the words. I hope you believe those words. The Apostle's Creed, along with all the other historic creeds of the church, revolve around Jesus. Christianity really only believes in one thing, Jesus! The words of the Apostle's Creed,

and the other historic creeds of the church, mean nothing if you don't believe in Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

One of the names forgotten in history is Jean Francois Gravelot. In the 1860's he was a household name. He was known as the "The Great Blondin." He was a stunt performer or "daredevil." To be more exact, he was a tightrope walker, who succeeded many times. One of his greatest feats was when he attempted to walk over Niagara Falls. Before he began, he addressed the crowd, asking them this question: "Do you believe, I, the Great Blondin," can walk a tightrope across the falls?" The crowd yelled back, "We believe! We believe!" Full of confidence, he jumped on the tightrope and crossed over the falls! The crowd went wild. A short time later, he announced he would cross Niagara Falls again--this time, pushing a wheelbarrow. When the day came the crowd was even larger. Before he began, he addressed the crowd again, asking them this question: "Do you believe, I, The Great Blondin, can cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope, pushing a wheelbarrow?" The crowd really believed, so they yelled back, "We Believe! We Believe!" This time, The Great Blondin responded with these words, "If you really believe in me, then jump in the wheelbarrow and go with me." The crowd suddenly grew silent. The only sound heard was the rushing sound of the falls. I tell you that story for one reason. There is a world of difference between saying you believe and believing. Do you just say you believe in Jesus, or do you really believe in Jesus? Let me explain.

Many say they believe in Jesus because they want the benefits of following Jesus. They say they believe in Jesus because they want to be forgiven. They say they believe in Jesus because they want to feel loved by God. They say they believe because they need security. They want to believe that God is in charge. This is what life has taught me. Many say they believe in Jesus because they want to go to heaven. Like the crowd surrounding "The Great Blondin," they say they believe, but they don't want to take any risks. In other words, they say they believe without sacrificing anything. I hope that is not your story. I hope your belief in Jesus changes you. I hope your belief in Jesus inspires you to be a little more like Jesus every day. Jesus sacrificed it all! How much of your life are you willing to sacrifice to God? It is a difficult question, because no one wants to sacrifice too much. It is really a question of true stewardship. Before we go to the communion table, let me ask you three questions.

How much of your time are you willing to sacrifice to God? Every day God gives us 1,440 minutes. Economics does not matter. Race does not matter. Gender does not matter. Everyone gets 1,440 minutes every day. I would like to say how you spend your time is a personal choice. The problem is, I do not want to lie. In many ways, how we spend our time is predetermined. According the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average employed American day breaks down this way:

8.9 hours working
7.7 hours sleeping

- 2.5 hours leisure and sports
- 1.2 hours caring for others
- 1.1 hours eating and drinking
- 1.0 hours household activities
- 1.6 miscellaneous activities

There are only 1,440 minutes each day and most of that time is predetermined. You have to work, eat and sleep. It takes time to handle your responsibilities. Finding time for God is a real sacrifice because your time is limited. If you really believe in Jesus, then you will find the time. It is all a question of priority. How big of a priority is God to you? Do you believe in Jesus, or do you just want to go to heaven? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

How much of your talent are you willing to sacrifice to God? I am always humbled by all the gifted people in this church. We are not a megachurch, so much of what we do is done by volunteers. You have heard me speak of the "80/20 principle" in the past. It says, 80% of the money is given and 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people. I believe that principle is correct. As a matter of fact, I think it should be renamed the "90/10 principle". That is, 90% of the money and 90% of the work is done by 10% of the people. We are talking about your personal talent. Let me ask you this uncomfortable question: If everyone did as much as you do for this church, would our ministry expand or contract? Do you believe in Jesus, or do you just want to go to heaven? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

How much of your money are you willing to sacrifice to God? Did you know, according to *Relevant Magazine*, the average churchgoer gives 2% of their annual income to the church. The standard is a tithe; 10%. It is hard to justify the 2% figure, because during the Great Depression the average churchgoer gave 3.3% to the church. Only 5% of Americans tithe. Those figures make us feel guilty, but those figures always make us consider what is possible. Churches were never meant to limp along financially. Churches were meant to be financially stable so churches could help people in need. Did you know that if all churchgoers tithed, church income in America would jump \$165 billion? How many people could we help if everyone here tithed? If everyone gave as much as you give, would our ministry expand or contract? Do you believe in Jesus, or do you just want to go to heaven? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Why are you a Christian? The answer is Jesus. The Master said it best himself, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* There is a world of difference between saying you believe and believing. How much are you sacrificing to God? As we come to this communion table, let me ask you one last question: Do you believe?